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Kremlin's role at heart of upcoming trial in '81 plot to kill pope

ROME (Reuter) — When eight Bulgarians and Turks go on trial Monday charged with taking part in a plot to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981, the burning question will be: Was the Kremlin behind the shooting?

This is the inevitable implication of the indictment of two former officials of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome and a Bulgarian airline employee, along with five Turks allegedly linked with an extreme right-wing guerrilla group in Turkey.

Only one Bulgarian — Sergei I. Antonov, deputy director for Italy of the Bulgarian airline Balkanair — and three Turks are being held in Italy. The other four defendants left the country before they were charged and will be tried in their absence.

The prosecution case in what Italian newspapers are calling the trial of the century hinges on the evidence of Mehmet Ali Agca, 27, a Turk already serving a life sentence in Italy for shooting and seriously injuring the pope in St. Peter's Square May 13, 1981.

Agca, arrested at the scene, was

tried and sentenced within two months. He will be in the dock once again in the trial next week, this time on charges of smuggling a Browning pistol into Italy as part of the alleged plot.

Of the other defendants, Mr. Antonov, 36, is said to have organized the Rome end of the plot along with Todor Ayvazov, former treasurer at the Bulgarian Embassy here, and Maj. Zhelyo K. Vassilev, a former military attache. Both diplomats have returned to Bulgaria.

Also in Bulgaria is Bekir Celenk, a Turkish businessman alleged to have organized the financing of the attack.

The fourth absentee is Oral Celik, Agca's alleged backup man, a Turk who the indictment says was in St. Peter's Square when the pope was shot but who has not been seen since.

In court with Agca and Mr. Antonov will be two more Turks, Omer Bagci, 39, said to have given Agca the pistol used in the shooting, and Musa Serdar Celebi, 33, alleged to have acted as a go-between. Mr.

Bagci was extradited to Italy from Switzerland, and Mr. Celebi from West Germany.

For about a year after his arrest, Agca insisted that he had acted alone, as a Muslim militant out to murder a champion of Christianity.

Then, in a stream of startling revelations to magistrates and the press, he implicated those who are now his codefendants as well as others in a complex international conspiracy.

Among other things, Agca claimed he had been trained in Syria and Bulgaria by Bulgarian secret ser-

vice agents and the Soviet security police, the KGB.

While admitting that Agca has changed his story, Italian magistrates say they have found evidence to corroborate his accounts of meetings with Bulgarians and are convinced there was an international plot.

Antonio Albano, Rome's deputy public prosecutor, said in a report last year that the East bloc saw the Polish-born pontiff as "a mortal danger" because of his moral authority for leaders of Solidarity, the now-banned Polish free trade union that was powerful at the time.

"In some secret place ... some politician of great power ... in conformity with the vital higher interests of the Eastern bloc, arrived at the decision that it was necessary to kill Karol Wojtyla [the pope]," Mr. Albano wrote.

In his indictment committing the eight Bulgarians and Turks for trial, investigating magistrate Ilario Martella described Agca as "a pawn in a vast plot put together to assassinate the pope" but avoided direct political

accusations.

He branded the murder plot "a real act of war against the most authentic lasting values of the civilized world."

Sofia and Moscow have flatly denied any Bulgarian role in the attack, and Mr. Antonov has protested his innocence ever since his arrest in November, 1982.

Pointing to a visit Agca received in December, 1981, from two Italian secret service men, the Bulgarian and Soviet state news agencies charged that Western intelligence put him up to his allegations to discredit the Communist countries.

They also have claimed that the "Gray Wolves" rightist group with which the Turkish defendants allegedly are linked has ties with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, not with the Eastern bloc.

The trial will be held in a fortified bunker made from a converted gymnasium near Rome's Olympic stadium, which was used for the trial of the Red Brigade guerrillas who kidnapped and murdered Italian statesman Aldo Moro in 1978.